

Bat visit is big hit for young fans

By LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

Beechview became Batview school Monday as a woman brought five of the winged species to show off.

Spirit, Walnut, Squeaker, Mogli and Bela were bigger hits with kids than any wooden baseball variety bats could have produced.

The mammals get a bad rap, said Laurie Nelson of the Organization for Bat Conservation. The Williamston, Mich.-based group puts a positive P.R. spin on the bat's story, which is largely marred by myth and wives' tales.

"I think a lot of reasons people are afraid of bats is the first thing they see is photos like this where they have their mouths open," said Nelson, showing kids a picture of bat bearing its teeth. "That, and they are associated with vampires."

Bats are not blind. They don't

get tangled in people's hair and less than one-half of one percent of the bat population have rabies, Nelson said.

The reason bats often have their mouths wide open is they use echolocation where they bounce high-pitched auditory messages off objects — like insects — in order to locate them.

Subsequent slides depict bats as almost cute, cuddly creatures. Later, Beechview Principal Norma Jean Sass said, "I have to admit they are cute, but just not in my garage."

With every picture, Nelson had a story about a bat's usefulness.

Fruit bats in South America help the rain forest replenish itself. Since they cannot digest seeds from the fruit they eat, the seeds get dropped and thus replanted.

Palette bats in the desert chew

on scorpions, tarantulas and large centipedes.

"I think the people in Arizona are pretty happy about that," Nelson said.

Smaller microbats — prevalent in Michigan — gorged themselves on insects, swallowing 600 to 1,000 an hour.

Cool, said the kids. But, piped one boy, "When are we going to see the live bats?"

Nelson introduced Spirit, a 3-year-old red bat housed at the observatory. Bats used for observation and educational presentations have been orphaned or injured.

Squeaker, an evening bat, is missing a wing — the result of getting hit with a tennis racket in an overzealous attempt by someone to remove it from a house. Spirit had both wings and her nose broken.

"Some landscapers found her in a tree and thought it would be funny to play kick ball with her," Nelson said.

Nelson used a monitor to detect the sound while Spirit

munched on a mule worm. The loud chomp held the auditory boom of 50 linebackers at a salad bar.

"She's pretty rude," Nelson said.

Mogli, an Egyptian fruit bat, hung upside down on Nelson's sweater while she rubbed the animal's chin. Mogli was donated to the organization by a zoo.

Bela, a Jamaican leaf nose bat, was bought by a woman at an auction. The owner put the bat in a cage and fed it fruit cocktail. The bat soon became weak and the woman called the organization for help.

Bats, though not posing a danger, do not make good pets. In fact, keeping them as pets is illegal.

"They need a lot of care," Nelson said.

The Organization for Bat Conservation rescues and releases hundreds of the mammals a year.

The organization raises money through memberships, sale of bat roosts, books and through



Bat handle: Kara Charbarnea gets a close-up look at a Michigan bat.

school programs.

Nelson, a 1993 graduate of Westland Lutheran High, was enamored with the species of dark legend since she was 8. She recalls how she wanted to specialize in the study of bats in college, but was continually dissuaded by school counselors.

She went on to major in biology at Michigan State University.

Then she met Kim Williams and Rob Miles, who started the Organization for Bat Conservation.

That was one message Nelson wanted to leave with kids before she and her bats flew off.

"You can study anything you want," Nelson said.

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Sway bats instead of swinging at them.

Whether they're in the belfry, garage or house, the Organization for Bat Conservation recommends that people don't kill the increasingly endangered mammals.

Rather people should simply remove them. Bats accidentally fly in through open windows and doors in homes. They're just as afraid of you as you are of them.

Here are a few suggestions to get a bat to beat it without beating up the bats:

■ Turn on lights in order to see the bats and for them to see you. (They're not blind.)

■ Close doors to adjoining rooms while opening windows or doors in the room where the bat is flying around.

■ If possible, turn on a light outside that

helps direct the bat to exit.

■ A more direct approach involves using a small mesh net or pillow case to catch the bat in flight and to push it outside.

If the bat is stationary, put on a thick pair of leather gloves and use a cardboard box or coffee can. Slowly walk up to the bat and put the container over it and then slip a piece of cardboard or book behind the container before taking it outside.

There is no harm of getting transmitted diseases or viruses as long as the bat doesn't touch anyone.

If bats are living in an attic, walls or other crevices, the only way to relocate them is to do so humanely, conservationists say.

The process should be done in early spring or late summer. Experts suggest finding where the bats are entering and place a wooden "bat house" nearby.

Homeowners should leave the bat house open for a week before securing the opening in their own home. Experts suggest using plastic or bird netting and tape all sides of the screen except the bottom, which allows bats to exit but not enter.

Bats gobble up to 1,000 insects an hour.

Bat houses are available for \$32 from the Organization for Bat Conservation. Call 817-655-9200 for information or E-mail: obc-bats@aol.com.

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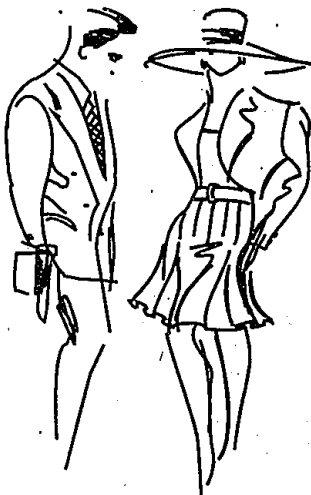
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